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**‘On the horns of a dilemma’!**

# **Climate Change, Forest Conservation and the Marginal People in Indian Sundarbans**

Dayabati Roy

The discourse on climate change did not originate as an elitist affair, so there is little question whether, as some scholars argue (Beck 2010; Mathur 2015), it remains an elitist one. Rather, climate change discourse is more concerned with marginal people - peasants in particular - who suffer in their everyday lives due to the effects of climate change. These effects disrupt the lives of millions all over the world, with artisans and fishers particularly affected. When I first embarked upon my fieldwork in the Indian Sundarbans (SDB), I realized that the peasants and fishermen knew that climate change was not something ‘out there’ that they adapted to, as Taylor (2017) argues; they had consistently been trying to cope with the changing environment that was actively yet unevenly produced (Ibid: x-xvii). Elites, defined in this paper as the people who hold social and/or political power, frequently turn climate change into an explanation for many unwanted incidences to excuse their wrongdoings (Mathur 2015)<sup>1</sup>. However, it remains unclear if the elites successfully escape criticism through this strategy. To attempt to shed light on this gap, I explored the way in which the state and its elites are interpreting climate change by framing forest conservation policies in the Indian Sundarbans which have thereby affected various classes and social groups that are located at different spatial scales within this community.

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<sup>1</sup> While it is undeniable that the local state bureaucracies in India would turn climate change into an explanation for many unwanted incidences to excuse their wrongdoings, as Mathur (2015) argues, it is evident widely that there is a linkage between recurring incidences of human-animal conflict and climate change.

Globally, forest conservation policies are increasingly integral parts of climate change mitigation and adaptation policies (CCMA). But new research (e.g. Borras Jr et al. 2018; Borras Jr and Franco 2018; Franco, Boris Jr 2019; Hunsberger, Work and Herre 2018; Work et al. 2018) reveals that implementations of the CCMA policies in various developing countries are also disrupting the lives of climate change affected people in different ways depending on their respective socio-economic conditions. A common thread in this scholarship is that elites could benefit enormously at the expense of the subaltern classes if the CCMA policies are not constructed based upon social justice issues. This paper as well seeks to understand this specific issue in the context of SDB, building on ethnographic research design<sup>2</sup>. By understanding this specific issue, it tries to explore how both the economic/development policies and the CCMA forest conservation policies are dispossessing the peasantry in the SDB and making them more vulnerable to climate change. Using a political ecology lens, it argues why it is significant to go beyond the capitalist ‘growth’ framework in order to formulate more grounded climate and social justice legislation.

While Latour (2017) argues and stresses rightly that, in this ‘new climatic regime’, powerful and developed countries like the United States are making systemic efforts ‘to deny the existence of climate change’, some recent researches reveal how powerful countries use global policies<sup>3</sup> for exploiting the uneven climatic regime for their own benefit. Drawing on findings from Cambodia, Work et al. (2018: 12) argue that, ‘it is not just corrupt, patrimonial, and kleptocratic governments in the global south that write laws and policies only to ignore them in practice, but also international development donors, governments of developed

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<sup>2</sup>This ethnographic research is part of a broad collaborative project entitled ‘Sustainable Livelihoods and the Politics at the Margins: Environmental Displacement in South Asia’ funded by Academy of Finland. It looks into how the issues of climate change or environment, whatever it may be, have been a part of the factors responsible for out-migration of the rural people from the SDB region. I have chosen a big and ever-growing slum neighbourhood, just beside the E. M. Bypass at the eastern fringe of Kolkata City, where the people from various regions of the SDB have constantly been making their place for around more than three decades with an aim of living. Following the track to the villages, I have visited then the rural areas of the SDB from where the slum-dwellers came.

<sup>3</sup> By global policies, which concern climate change, I want to mean the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Rules and Guidelines. The UNFCCC states in its convention, for instance, that economic development is vital to the world’s developing or poorer countries and so the share of greenhouse gas emission will grow in coming years. This is to say, the convention emphasizes more on economic efficiencies than on ecological sustainability as far as developing countries are concerned. Furthermore, the convention has directed the developed countries to support the developing countries in their climate change related activities by way of providing financial assistance and sharing technologies.

nations, and corporations’. That said, apart from the non-compliance of the good part of the law that they drafted, the international development donors, governments of both developed and developing nations, and the corporations, in particular, have been utilizing in their own interests the policies and legislations related to both climate change mitigation and climate change adaptation. Simply put, these CCMA policies are framed in such a way that elites, whatever their level, could benefit from them.

Other scholars (e.g. Borras Jr et al. 2018a; Borras Jr and Franco 2018b) offer two conjectures that help contextualize my arguments. Borras Jr. and others (2018a: 1227) argue that ‘agrarian, food, environmental issues across rural/urban, and Global North/South divides have always intertwined since they are all in part and to varying extents shaped by global capitalism’. Further, capitalism has ‘pushed such entanglement to new thresholds’ as responses to multiple crises ‘fail to move beyond the logic that caused them in the first place’ (Ibid: 1227). This is to say, capitalism, which is the cause of crises, is also the response to crises. Explaining the dynamic nature of climate-smart agriculture (CSA), Borras Jr and Franco (2018 b: 1308-9) argue that, ‘CSA constitutes an important ideological milestone where the notion of *ecological sustainability* is conjured as urgent and strategic alongside the neoliberal notion of *economic efficiency*. What remains unanswered is the question of if the neoliberal notion of economic efficiency has always shaped the notion of ecological sustainability but perhaps not vice versa.

The notion of economic efficiency thus dispossesses peasants at the grassroots twice: one, in the name of sheer economic efficiency, and two, in the name of ecological sustainability. If we study the trajectory of the formulation of various policies and legislation related to both development and forest conservation in the Indian SDB, we can see how the notion of economic efficiency has been a primary focus even in the domain of conservation policies, thereby turning the SDB into an ecologically vulnerable site. The Sundarbans, both the Indian and Bangladesh parts, have suffered a consistent loss of biodiversity and ecological vulnerability. Furthermore, these ‘economically efficient’ policies have not only made local residents economically vulnerable to climate change as well as CCMA policies but also weaken social justice. Using a storytelling frame, in the next sections I explain, analyze and interpret these issues as they relate to ecology, economy, and politics. Storytelling is here a

method of narration, a technique of organizing that narration, and a way of making an argument (Moezzi et al.2017). This is thus a kind of narration of the experiences and circumstances that provides meaning to the villagers' experiences and conditions.

The remaining part of the paper has five sections. While the first section 'A new space of accumulation' engages with how the British colonialists did explore the SDB as a new space of accumulation, the second part 'Emerging coastal frontier' deals with the way in which the postcolonial government would pursue the same path as the colonialists did to develop this frontier in terms of accumulation. The third part 'Accumulation through conservation' tells a story of how the postcolonial government in India would orchestrate a concerted effort in accumulation-based development in the name of conservation of SDB. Whereas the fourth section 'Climate change, a pretext!' explores the dynamic way in which the government uses the climate change and conservation excuse to evict the Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers from the forestlands, the last section concludes by giving some clues about an alternative, and argues why we should go beyond the capitalist 'growth' narrative to formulate a more grounded climate and social justice legislation.

### **A new space of accumulation!**

SDB is a place, as Mukhopadhyay says (2016: 4), where land is found at the mercy of the river and where, water or wave, nothing settles. My ethnography in the Indian part of SDB<sup>4</sup> revealed the same story of contradictions; not only between land and water, but also between land and forest, and forest and water. All my informants informed me how this complex local terrain changed noticeably after geo-social developments began. Although their accounts do not perfectly match, they all confirm that it is an unsettling terrain. However, successive governments of West Bengal describe this unsettling delta/terrain 'as a forested landscape, a wildlife sanctuary and heritage site whose conservation is of crucial importance'. The human intervention in forests first began at the hands of the British colonialists. Like any other forests

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<sup>4</sup> I am considering as my study site only the Indian part of SDB, which falls actually within the jurisdiction of West Bengal, an Indian province, since the Bangladesh part of SDB, has its own socio-political dynamics and ethno-history. Although a comparative study between these two parts of SDB in context of climate, development and conservation could have offered a better understanding into how a balanced climate and social justice policy should be constructed, this paper looks into the trajectory of development of a particular socio-geographical site in relation to policy intervention of the state.

in anywhere in the globe, these wild forests began to transform into modern forests. Forests in India and SDB in particular, as Sivaramakrishnan (1999) argues, have transformed into modern forests under the colonial regime of scientific forestry and management. Upon using the concept of state-making, Sivaramakrishnan argues that forests were identified, classified and brought under different regimes of control to serve a variety of imperial and local interests (Ibid: 1-6). While it is important to study the ways in which certain ideas and forces became dominant at various times for managing the forests, our context must explain how and why the forests and the SDB, in particular, turned into such a vulnerable one.

As ‘pristine forests’ were transformed into ‘modern forests’, they began to change their ecology under the administrative dictates of scientific or modern knowledge. The rulers then harnessed the scientific and modern knowledge which being dominant though contested all through by local knowledge to manage the forests in their interest. Different rulers, in particular the British colonialists who initiated the project of forest management, accomplished the latter through the processes of state-making at the margin. The state is thus the institution through which the management of forests in the undivided SDB has been initiated, conceptualized, contested and implemented, as Sivaramakrishnan (1999) argues. Therefore, the management of forests, as well as the state-making, has gone hand in hand with the SDB. The state making and the management of forests has been shaping the SDB as a space as well as local lives and livelihoods. In other words, the state management of forests would determine the fate of both the SDB and its residents during these long periods. The question is whether this management of forests has been beneficial to both the SDB and its islanders.

The SDB has consistently been reclaimed since around 1757-65, and ‘often been portrayed in ways which suited those in power’ as Jalais (2007:337) illustrates. Once perceived as a “wasteland” by the British colonialists—who nonetheless lost no time transforming the place into a revenue-generating one (Ibid), the SDB have now been termed as a wonderland for tourists who love wildlife and pristine nature. Jalais (2007) also finds a lopsided dichotomy between ‘fascination for the natural aspects of the Sundarbans’ on the one hand, and ‘an unsettling silence on the social and human facet of the region’, on the other.

However, I argue that this never has been a true dichotomy. Historical (e.g. Hunter 1875) as well the present-day studies' neglect are the social and human aspects of the region as they focus on the natural aspects. This positionality encourages an extractive mindset. In 1875, when Hunter wrote his book, SDB had a negligible proportion of the human population<sup>5</sup>. Although the British established its forest department in the 1860s, the reclamation of lands for revenue extraction through the settlement of marginal people in the SDB began much later. The attempts at reclamation of land would not succeed initially in this region, particularly in its south part, since it was then a remote and waterlogged dense forest. My previous research (e.g., Banerjee and Roy 2005) and various historical sources reveal that the reclamation of lands in the SDB picked up only after the 1930s-40s. As one octogenarian villager from a village, South 24 Parganas, informed us then:

It was around 1934 when I arrived here from Midnapore<sup>6</sup> (a district located in the southern part of West Bengal). I was the person who first spaded here the soil. With this spading the soil, the reclamation of lands from forests began. It was the dense mangrove forests inhabited by many animals including tigers. The zamindaris (landlordism) were bestowed on the people who belong mostly to the district of Midnapore by the British government. The zamindars (landlord) would bring their tenants from Midnapore as well. The only way to reach this region was then waterways. It took three/four days to travel from Midnapore by waterways (Ibid: 71).

Two factors might have been responsible for the increase in the reclamation of lands in the SDB. First, the Bengal economy was at a low point (Roy 2018). The poverty-stricken landless and marginal people from various parts of Bengal particularly from Midnapore district seemed to buy easily the colonial government's proposal for resettlement in the SDB through the reclamation of lands. The migrant marginal people toiled hard to reclaim these lands from dense waterlogged forests, and to resettle themselves subsequently as revenue paying tenants.

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<sup>5</sup> It is true, as Greenough (1998: 240) and Jalais (2007: 337) argue, I quote, 'that Hunter only mentions in passing the people, referring to them as a few wandering tribes and classifying them after long lists of animals and plants'. However, it is also true that both the colonial and postcolonial policy makers would use the human population as crucial resources for the extraction of revenues.

<sup>6</sup> The district of Midnapore has now been divided into three districts, namely, East Midnapore, West Midnapore, and Jhargram.

Second, the colonial government was also desperate to reclaim new stretches of land at the margin of Bengal, since it was also at their worst during this period (Ibid). They took no time ‘to split soils and fluids into discrete domains’ in the SDB region (Lahiri–Dutta and Samanta 2013; Cosgrove and Petts 1990). They exploited the terrain in terms of, on the one hand, agricultural extension and revenue collection, and on the other, fishing and forest produce collection. Subsequent periods saw scaling-up of these measures at the margins of SDB. However, these government efforts to extract nature were often coupled with legislative and policy interventions in forest conservation. India has witnessed a long trajectory of legislative interventions in forest management during both the colonial and postcolonial periods. Although the first-ever forest policy in its embryonic stage was enacted in 1894, the colonial government conceptualized and passed a sophisticated and well-thought Forest Act only in 1927. This was the beginning of the legislative intervention in forest conservation in India. However, even though the very first law confirmed ‘the recognition of forest resource as an immensely valuable natural resource’, these forest legislations did not conserve the forest resources effectively.

The genealogy of forest legislations in India indicates that almost all legislations embody two aims which are not only contradictory but also hierarchical. While the first task is the state regulation of forests, the second is the state recognition of rights of forest dwellers to forests. Over the past century of legislative intervention in forests, India has seen a dominant prioritization of the first task at the expense of the second task. While considering formally, albeit unenthusiastically, the rights of traditional forest-dwellers, the government has enthusiastically implemented the first task, no matter whether the government was colonial or postcolonial. It is undeniable that the British colonial government while framing the Indian Forest Act (1927) focused more on the regulation or control of the vast areas of forests than on the recognition of rights of traditional forest-dwellers. Their main aim then was to maximize the accumulation of revenues in the state exchequer by institutionalizing or legalizing the forestland rights. They used to exploit thus the vast forest areas through converting it from water/forests, and subsequently implementing various development programmes on it. One of my informants vividly describes the trajectory of these transformations. In his words,



‘The village was just a wetland in midst of dense forests. The narrow stream, which is now flowing beside the village, was then a full river, and we would commute through this river by boats. The village has transformed into an agricultural one before my very eyes. However, the point is that the village has changed, not our lives. We are the same as before.’ (interview conducted by the author in September 2018)

## **Emerging Coastal Frontier**

However, the aims of the postcolonial government of India have been little different. While emphasizing more on the rights of traditional forest-dwellers than their progenitor, the postcolonial government has framed and reframed forest laws in a similar fashion, considering the utilization of lands in and around forests in terms of economic growth. Before discussing the major enactment, the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980<sup>7</sup>, in the context of the overall development of SDB, I would like to delve a bit into local livelihood dynamics.

For this study, I have conducted an ethnographic exploration in a village of South 24 Parganas that is located at the southernmost part of the SDB. Surrounded by a dying river and a declining forest, this village is inhabited mainly by the so-called Scheduled Caste (SC)<sup>8</sup> people. I interviewed 97 persons from the same number of families who belong to different subgroups of the SC category. The interviewees represent a cross-section of the SC category in the village. Among the 275 families in the village, Naskars are 61, Haldars are 16, Ghoramis are 29, Gayens are 85, Sardars are 50, Laskars are 30 and Mandals are 4. For my study, I purposively selected a representative sample of families from each of the caste subgroups. Among the 97 interviewees, 51 are women as they are the ones who usually remain at home

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<sup>7</sup> I have here taken into account for discussion the forest Conservation Act, 1980, since it has been marked as one of the most prominent guiding policies as far as forest conservation is concerned in postcolonial India. The postcolonial government of India had adopted a National Forest Policy as early as in 1952. This Forest Policy, 1952 seemingly being essentially the same as the colonial act would recommend that 33 percent of the total land area of the country should be brought under forest or tree cover.

<sup>8</sup> The Scheduled Caste (SC) are officially designated groups of people who belong to the lower caste considered untouchable in Hindu scriptures and practice. The SC people are regarded as socially disadvantaged.

when we would go for interacting with them. Based upon caste subgroup classification, 15 belong to Naskar, 8 belong to Halдар, 5 from Ghorami, 40 from Gayen, 17 from Sardar, 10 from Laskar and 2 from Mandal. I also discussed my research questions with *Panchayat* representatives, governmental officials, political activists, and NGO persons. This ethnographic study (2018) is based on interviews, discussions, and observations. This village of South 24 Parganas is a space that can be called ‘ecotones’<sup>9</sup> which exists between dense forests and cultivation. Moreover, the residents of this village often struggle with ‘mangrove tigers’ who advance therein. This village came into being around the late 1930s-1940s. There was only a zamindar (landlord) initially in this village, but his family shared this long stretch of land afterward with some kin, as informed by one of his successors. These 4/5 families constituted the landed families in this village; other families were sharecropper tenants and landless labourers. The people would use for transportation the river that has now almost dried out. One side of the village was dense forest, which has now been nearly cleared. Another side was wetlands where the villagers used to grow only one crop, mainly paddy, through rainwater. With this one crop, the villagers could not have sustained their livelihoods unless the mangrove-forest-river ecosystem had supported them. The villagers left no stone unturned to harness this ecosystem for their survival. They fished and collected forest produce at the level of subsistence, often risking their lives. Wild animals like tigers and crocodiles were their main contenders in this food chain.

However, there existed a contention in the cultivation food chain since the very inception during the 1940s-1950s. This contention revolved around lands and its ownership. A few landowners extracted the major portion of the agricultural produces that the mass of villagers harvested as a sharecropper<sup>10</sup> in the former’s lands. The landless labourers would get jobs

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<sup>9</sup> According to Oxford dictionary English lexicon, ecotone means ‘a region of transition between two biological communities’ or ecological communities. Ecotones are often richer in species than the two communities that make the former. An ecotone may also indicate ‘a place where two communities meet and at times germinating into a new community’, as Ecotones study group states. This term, which was used earlier in Geography and Environmental studies, has now also been used in Social Sciences and Postcolonial studies in particular including ethnic studies and Eco-criticism. The village in SDB under my study is a perfect example of ecotone between forested mangroves and agricultural lands. The question is whether these ecologies change their shapes through influencing each other, and germinating into a new community.

<sup>10</sup> The sharecropper *bargadar* is a type of tenant who borrows land from the landlords or other landholding classes for cultivation with the condition of giving a particular fixed share of the crops produced on the land to the landowners. The Left Front government, in its initial days of power, had launched the ‘Operation Barga’

only for a few months as a major portion of lands were mono-crop in nature. Their wages were inadequate for the sustenance of their families. Both the fishers and the forest-produce collectors remained under the control of the proprietor class in the village. The latter extracted a good portion of the former's earnings in exchange of means of livelihoods. The fishers, as well as the forest produce collectors, were more often than not compelled to borrow boats and other necessary items owned by the landowners. Therefore, no cultivator and artisan in this region could earn enough income for their subsistence. They would often migrate to Kolkata in search of manual day labourer jobs. The village ethnography finds many such families who have records of migration particularly to Kolkata for work since as early as the 1950s. Though many of them have returned to the village especially when they become old, they have always some linkages with Kolkata as at least one family member would work in Kolkata.

Therefore, marginal families who constitute the majority of villagers had always been vulnerable to deprivation in this ecotone, where one could have availed the opportunities to harness the vitality of two ecosystems. Inter-species and intra-species relational dynamics shrank the benefit they could harness. During the 1960s and 70s, communists of various shades embarked upon an intervention in the domain of intra-species class relation, and initiated land reforms by way of land redistribution<sup>11</sup>. Around 40-50 landless and sharecropper peasants enjoyed the benefit of the land redistribution programme implemented by the SUCI<sup>12</sup> party. This was the period when the communists took in practice the land reform act enacted by the central government, seized the lands above the ceiling that kept in hands of proprietors, and subsequently redistributed the same among the landless people. However, the proportion of land the landless people got was so meager that it hardly changed their conditions. Also, the SUCI did not continue implementation of the land redistribution programme after landowners from whom lands were supposed to be acquired for redistribution joined the SUCI

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programme to register the names of the sharecroppers so that the landowners could not evict them. The stipulated share of crops is three-fourth for the sharecropper and the rest to the landlords. See for details Roy (2013).

<sup>11</sup> The main feature of the programme of land reforms in West Bengal are 1) to detect and vest ceiling surplus lands through quasi-judicial investigative machinery with the help of rural party activists particularly belonging to the CPI(M) and the PRIs, and redistribute them to the landless peasants.

<sup>12</sup> SUCI (Socialist Unity Centre of India) is one of the left communist parties operating outside the Left Front in West Bengal.

party themselves. Therefore, new dynamics emerged due to the political parties' intervention, and the situation had not changed as far as the marginal villagers were concerned.

These marginal people remained vulnerable in two places, rural and urban, despite being active in the space of labour. They were the reserve pool of labour ever ready for joining in any kind of manual job, 'foot soldiers' who moved between rural and urban spaces, participant witnesses of the change in both terrains. What many of the octogenarians informed me is significant for understanding this changing terrain. The village was earlier part of the dense forests including a streaming river, and they could have easily switched between the two ecosystems for their survival though not so prosperously. However, at present only one ecosystem (cultivation) has successfully altered the other ecosystem. Cultivation has prospered, changed the forests-river terrain, and prioritized itself as 'one and only' livelihood at the expense of livelihoods that are related to the other ecosystem. The question is whether the changing forests-river ecosystem as well is now taking its turn for spoiling the cultivation ecosystem. Regarding the ecotone between rural and urban at the margin of the city, one might ask the same question. However, what should concern us the most is the phenomenon that these marginal people would never change their fate in a positive term. Let me now elaborate on this phenomenon and address these questions.

### **Accumulation through conservation!**

Ever since the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 was conceived and subsequently enacted by the central government, the state government of West Bengal opened a new chapter regarding the SDB. The state government took a formal endeavor to develop the 'backward' (SDB has all through been described as backward in government literature) SDB by establishing the Sundarbans Development Board (1973), and afterwards transforming the same into a full-fledged department in 1994. What the reason behind the initiative to establish an SDB department? One might argue that the state government would undertake this kind of initiative since it simply wanted to support the forest-dependent people who would become out of work due to the implementation of forest conservation policies. And, for that reason, the state government would want to make the cultivation front more productive so that the forest-

dependent people could begin to depend on cultivation. I would argue, instead, that this initiative was nothing but a governmental agenda of 1) exploiting the SDB ecotone more effectively and 2) governing more fruitfully the people located in the ‘inaccessible’ region. If we take a cursory look into the website of the said department, we see the way in which the state government had planned to develop this so-called ‘backward’ SDB region. Their first and foremost task has been, since the very beginning, the development of infrastructure, particularly, the communication infrastructure.

The question is, however, whether India has witnessed any significant changes in policies and laws as far as agriculture, development and forest conservation are concerned with the change in governments at both central and state level over the period. There are no doubts that India has witnessed a number of changes in policies and laws in respective fields with the change in governments. But these changes in policies and laws, as my research reveals, have hardly brought about any significant changes in viewpoint, ideology and objective. The policies and the laws which are framed and reframed in different regimes thus follow the same growth narrative. The change in government would not necessarily change its viewpoint. The Left Front government in West Bengal has been replaced by the Trinamul Congress, but the policies and laws that were framed and operational in the Left front regime have not been replaced by any new kind of policies and laws. Also, the policies and laws of the state government regarding agriculture and forest conservation would always follow the same ideological/political discourse as the central government would pursue.

As Scott argues (1998; 2009), the state always makes societies legible, but certain societies manage to avoid the state and thereby managing to make refuse in ethnicity. The case of SDB seems to be somewhat different initially in the context of the fact that, instead of communities fleeing from the state, the latter itself here pushes certain communities into an inaccessible region for its purpose of revenue extraction. However, it follows gradually afterward the same route of state making in an inaccessible region of SDB. Marking the islanders and islands as ‘backward’, the state began to bring these people in its reach, geographically, economically and culturally. The projects of the ‘nation-state societies’, as termed by Scott, began to have been implemented in the SDB as well with an aim of state-making. The projects of nation-state societies in the SDB include land and resource development that is significant to raise

the revenue in the state exchequer. As the communication infrastructures developed, so did the agriculture, fisheries, and forestry. All these land and resource development would follow the mainstream path of development championed by the Indian state.

Growth is undoubtedly the central focus in this grand narrative, as I have argued in one of my recent works (2018). I have explained in detail the way in which the state miserably fails to deliver employment justice in rural India due to a simple reason that it prioritizes growth as an all-purpose remedy. But in the SDB, increased economic growth did not resolve the crisis in employment, causing instead harm to bio-diversity/environment. The nature of agriculture, which had increased the growth in production in major parts of the state and even in the country, has been replicated in SDB, a declared biosphere reserve by none other than the government. Both the central and state government did not take any exception to what is considered to have been the mainstream path of development in agriculture. The more the state would implement these projects, the more it would integrate the islanders with itself. The more the islanders would integrate with the state, the more the nature would disintegrate its system. Here lies the crux of the issue.

When I first visited the department of Sundarbans Affairs, one of its key officers said, ‘what we have been trying to do is nothing but the increase in economic growth in SDB’. To fulfil this purpose,

We have been developing the infrastructures including *bandhs* (embankment), canals, bridges, and reservoirs. We also, of course, do distribute the agricultural inputs like implements, seeds, and manures for growing high yielding variety of crops. This department acts actually as a liaison office for coordinating the works of different departments like forests, irrigation, and public works in SDB.

( interview conducted by the author in August 2008)

Since the 1980s, this department has accomplished these works more or less successfully. Some of the officials of the department are so vocal about their ‘success story’ that they think their persistent developmental activities have alleviated greatly both poverty and beggary in

the SDB<sup>13</sup>. More interestingly, these officials rarely bother with nature conservation, environment, and climate change. According to them, these issues should concern the officials of other departments like forests or irrigation. It is clear, therefore, that the government has adopted few initiatives in reshaping its major/mainstream production/development policies, which are causing harm at the hinterland as far as climate change and its mitigation is concerned. The Sundarbans Affairs department does not frame any SDB or mangrove forests conservation specific programmes. What it has framed is a concerted effort to alter the ‘backward’ SDB region into a well-connected ‘developed’ region. The story of SDB has thus been a story of development from the perspective of government.

This story begins with economic development but ends at homogenization and growth. If one visits the SDB now, s/he must witness an unprecedented infrastructural development like wide concrete and brick roads, bridges on rivers and the concrete embankments. No one could brand the SDB anymore as remote as earlier in terms of its geographical distance. However, what is significant for our discussion is that it is not at all remote as far as the economy is concerned. The SDB that was once an ecotone, a transitional space, between two ecosystems, where the colonial rulers sent the marginal people to exhaust the natural potentials hidden at the eco-edge, has been transformed into a ‘fertile’ zone for the cultivation of genetically modified crops and inland fisheries (locally called *bheri*) at cost of the mangrove forests. The people belonging to different social groups who were depending earlier on the mangrove forests for their sustenance, and exploiting the same somewhat sustainably for generations basing mainly on their indigenous knowledge have now been homogenized through a standardized cultivation know-how. This new kind of standardized know-how concerning cultivation is based on scientific knowledge, which the modern state always prioritizes for fulfilling its aims of ‘development’<sup>14</sup>. This new way of cultivation has benefitted local artisans

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<sup>13</sup> An ex-official of Sundarbans Affairs Department, who himself belongs to the SDB region, says candidly that the SDB has developed in such way mainly as consequences of implementation of various development projects undertaken by his department that one could hardly find now a beggar in this region. He says, ‘it is our family custom since long to feed a beggar every day, but we are about to end observing this custom in want of beggars. The people from the SDB have been migrating to cities to earn extra money. In SDB, there is no dearth of jobs’.

<sup>14</sup> I have dealt with these issues in my earlier work (2018) where I have explained why the Indian government would adopt the so-called scientific farming particularly for increasing the rate of production, and would miserably fails to resolve the livelihood problems faced by the marginal people. This sustainable livelihood apart, the scientific farming has demolished the ecological sustainability.

initially by way of increasing the rate of production, as revealed from my ethnography. However, it has consequently altered the transitional phase of ecotones by way of prioritizing one ecosystem over another.

Various infrastructures, particularly those meant for agriculture, have caused a devastating change in river flow. After the construction of a bridge on the river in a nearby village, as informed by some villagers, the local river has gone dry. Some other villagers have a different opinion regarding the flow evaporation of the local river. They inform that the river is on the wane due to the transformation of nature of production into a commercial one. Since the 1990s, the villagers began to cultivate fisheries by acquiring riverside lands unscrupulously through using political connections. Many of them pursued large-scale deforestation for making room for the fisheries i.e. *bheries*<sup>15</sup>. In this village as well, the *bheri*-owners have not only obstructed the river flow but also destroyed a major part of the mangrove forests for constructing their fisheries/*bheries*. This process of deforestation exacerbated river erosion. Once *bheries* are constructed, these determine the tide of the rivers, and often hinder the water flows. In our case, the *bheries* and the residential settlement made on chars<sup>16</sup> have blocked the river flow once for all. Furthermore, agriculture has perhaps put the last nail in the coffin of river erosion. The high-yielding varieties of crops, which have now been exclusively selected for cultivation, require plenty of water, which cannot be available other than the extraction of groundwater. The villagers, despite suffering from increased costs of production due to the high price of groundwater, are now compelled to extract ground water for irrigating high-yield crops. The extraction not only dispossesses residents but also shrinks the groundwater level, exacerbating surface evaporation (Roy 2018). As a result, once flourishing mangrove forests have been drying up rapidly in the SDB.

Whether this mode of cultivation has caused a change in climate, or whether the change in climate has led to transform this forest landscape, is unclear. However, the government

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<sup>15</sup>*Bheri* is local name of shore-based aquaculture that is made through impounding tidal water from nearby rivers, constructing an embanked waterbody (usually 2-5 feet) and cultivating the assorted fishes. *Bheries* are emerging as alternative livelihood option particularly in the SDB of West Bengal. There is usually no need of manuring and feeding in this kind of system of culture.

<sup>16</sup> Chars are, I quote Lahiri-Dutt and Saanta (2013), ‘the part-land, part-water, low-lying sandy masses that exist within the riverbeds in the floodplains of lower Bengal.



development agenda has brought about a landscape change in this ecotone and, this change in landscape has altered the ecosystem / biodiversity significantly. Due to these changes, marginal people face a crisis in livelihoods, but so do other animals e.g. tigers face a crisis in foods. Interestingly, while the government pursued a ‘hyper-development’ agenda which diminished the natural habitat, it also promised to ‘put all its importance on the protection of wildlife’ (Jalais 2007: 338) often by ignoring the lives and livelihoods of the marginal islanders. The Marichjhanpi massacre (1979)<sup>17</sup> shows how the West Bengal government pursued a wildlife skew policy in the SDB. The then communist government, in the name of wildlife conservation, brutally evicted subaltern Bangladeshi refugees who began to settle on Marichjhanpi, an island.

The question that arises is whether the government, while ignoring the interests of the human population, would truly protect wildlife. The answer is no. Had the government prioritized the protection of wildlife, the nature of conservation policies would perhaps have been different from a development policy which affected negatively the Sundarbans biosphere reserve and caused harm to both wildlife and human populations. However, not all the classes among the islanders experienced this policy in the same way. While the land and *bheri* owners utilized this new space of economy in their interest, the landless and fishers bore the brunt of this new economy. They could not find sustainable livelihoods in the emerging frontier, nor could they depend anymore on forests and rivers. They were unable to depend on natural forests and rivers not only because the latter became vulnerable, but also because the government introduced a strict act barring them to enter the latter.

### **Climate Change, a pretext!**

The West Bengal government evicted refugees in the name of wildlife conservation while it pursued a ‘development’ policy which destroyed wildlife. This contradictory nature of actions was not only a phenomenon of the early regime of conservation in new India; it has indeed been dominating until today. In 2002, the islanders saw the same contradictory action

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<sup>17</sup>Mallick recently argues, however, in an unpublished paper, that, ‘it was the largest government massacre in independent India, yet for thirty years it was forgotten....In the four decades since then much has been learned about it but the scale of the massacre and the reasons for it remain unknown’.

undertaken by the government and endorsed by the Supreme Court of India, when the Court ordered the eviction of fishers from an island called Jambudwip ‘to make way for an RS. 5.4 billion tourism project sanctioned by the West Bengal government to the Sahara India group’ (Jalais 2007: 335)<sup>18</sup>. While pursuing a nature conservation policy, the government has been promoting the corporate monopoly business in a large stretch of water by evicting the fishers who would make their sustenance basing the said water resources. But is the conservation policy a pretext to evict the indigenous people who would pursue subsistence production? This question becomes more relevant when, in the context of climate change, the Government of India has raised a crisis alarm, and has adopted climate change adaptation and mitigation policies. The country saw, as a result, a stricter interpretation of the forest conservation law as far as forest dwellers/forest-dependent communities are concerned.

The Supreme Court judgment (13 Feb 2019) though stalled (28 Feb 2019) and not yet resolved is a case in point that had ordered that ‘all households whose rights claims under Forest Rights Act (FRA) have been rejected should be evicted from forests by July 2019’. As various media reports mention, approximately 9.5 million forest dwellers who were recognized and protected under the earlier Act had been declared as illegal encroachers in forestlands. It might sound paradoxical that the Act, which was essentially meant for the recognition of forest rights of the Scheduled Tribes (ST) and other traditional forest dwellers, has been used to exclude the same categories of forest dwellers as part of its implementation. The question is, therefore, whether this Act itself contains some inherent problems which cause a paradoxical effect of either protecting or curtailing the rights of traditional forest dwellers. Alternatively, the question is whether there are deficiencies on the part of the implementing agencies in interpretation of the Act in the interest of the genuine beneficiaries. The scholars and community researchers find loopholes both in conceptualization and implementation of the act by the policymakers and the implementing agencies. My current research on forest conservation in Sundarbans (SDB) reveals, however, that the Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 (henceforth FA, 1980) and the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers

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<sup>18</sup> The Sahara India Group as an international enterprise wanted to build a ‘world-class’ city centre spread over 250 km of water surface. The city-centre was planned to include a business centre, a cinema theatre, a cultural centre and even a helipad. The company would try to capitalize the virgin islands and beaches of pristine glory of the SDB and the Jambudwip in particular (See Jalais 2007).

(Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 (henceforth FRA, 2006) itself are perhaps the real culprit for excluding the traditional forest-dwellers from the forestlands. The implementation of these two acts have systematically evicted Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest-dwellers from their habitat, converting the forestlands into a zone of rampant plunder in the name of regularization, institutionalization, and conferment of rights.

In an interview (August 2018) with the author, a forest official candidly says, 'I believe that the government should not confer any forest rights to the villagers in the SDB. They will destroy the remainder of the forests, if they are conferred any forest rights. They are the encroacher on forests'. When I explored this issue in and around the village, an activist from Sundarbans Jana Shramajeebi Mancha (SJSJSM) (Sundarbans Mass workers Platform), gave a cry of anguish. 'Are not we the traditional conservators of forests of the SDB?' 'How are the forest dwellers being considered as forest encroachers?' While the state legally reduces a section of forest dwellers to encroachers, sometimes with a division like eligible encroachers and ineligible encroachers, the so-called illegal encroachers do claim themselves, not surprisingly, as forest conservators.

One can ask if the state itself is the real encroacher, as the activist asserts, since it has been intervening in the natural habitat by way of regulating/codifying forestlands, and of converting the forestlands into revenue lands. The traditional forest dwellers do rarely have any binary idea of nature/culture or exploitation/conservation. They are a part more of nature than a 'culture', and are, thus, hardly ever expected to possess a piece of paper as evidence that the government requires from them. One might be aware of a fact, as the law maintains, that the traditional forest dwellers 'live in the forest in harmony', and depend on it fully comparably more than on the market. If this fact is not considered as a ground for recognizing them as the traditional forest dwellers, what does the concerned government expect them to give as proof for claiming their rights to forestlands? In fact, what the endorsing authorities require is nothing but a piece of paper issued by any layer of the government institutions even if it is a court summon for encroaching on land. A report informs (March 2, 19) that around 60 forest residents belonging to a tribal community proudly using the court summons issued against them for encroaching on forestland in 2002 'as evidence that they had lived on the land in question before that' (Gokhale 2019).

After the pronouncement of previously mentioned Supreme Court verdict, several media reports revealed evidence that a large number of rejection of applications for forestland rights were arbitrary and ‘illegal’. Moreover, these rejections could be termed as violation of the law on part of the government since the latter has taken the decision about the forest dwellers’ claims by not following any legal guidelines, and asking the tribal applicants nationwide to furnish unfeasible records. This means that the officials have not been following the rules to the letter and decoding the codes of FRA differently often against the interest of forest-dwellers. Recently, Sen and Pattanaik (2018) argue that the FRA has not compulsorily been implemented in the Indian part of SBR due mainly to the limitations and bottlenecks inherent in the Act. The FRA as a universal act, as they assert, could neither address different institutional arrangements of diverse regional contexts nor resolve ‘several definitional contradictions within the Act itself’. The question that arises, therefore, is whether the FRA, like all other previous legislations, has been curtailing the natural rights of several deserving people in the name of conferring rights. The new rights-based agenda, as I argue elsewhere (Roy 2018), are not only redefining various entitlements but are also reinterpreting afresh its beneficiaries. The FRA, while being upheld as a historic act that could undo the historic injustices<sup>19</sup>, also poses a limit to the natural rights of the forest-dependent people, be it in the SBR or anywhere else in India by means of its scripted rules and guidelines.

Is it convincing that the government is unable to confer rights to all deserving beneficiaries simply due to some faulty rules/guidelines inherent in the Act or due to gross misinterpretation of the legislation on part of some reluctant officials? In fact, some sections of ‘eligible’ beneficiaries are denied rights to forestlands as part of institutionalization or regularization carried out by the government due to, seemingly, these two reasons. As my research reveals, if the government’s intention of pursuing an effective growth narrative<sup>20</sup> and of maximizing the resources in the interest of dominant classes is the first reason, the second reason would

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<sup>19</sup> The FRA, 2006, states that ‘the forest rights on ancestral lands and their habitat were not adequately recognized in the consolidation of State forests during the colonial period as well as in independent India resulting in historical injustices to the forest dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem’ (pp. 1).

<sup>20</sup> The government has explicitly noted in a Foreword written by Central Minister of Environment and Forests in the year 2004 that Rules and Guidelines of the Forest (conservation) Act, 1980, ‘have been framed for facilitating development activities.

be the traditional forest-dwellers' lack of interest in pursuing a state-sponsored growth narrative. Even the government has recognized that the traditional forest-dwellers have been 'integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem since they lack an interest in pursuing economic growth. (FRA 2006) If the state had a genuine intention of, first, conferring rights to the deserving beneficiaries and two, of conservation of forests, it would have included all the forest-dwellers who have been integral to the sustainability of the forests, irrespective of the materiality of documents. It is a truism that the bureaucracy not only implements policies/legislations, but also initiates state processes at the margin. Although it is apparent, as Mathur argues (2016), that the bureaucratic rule implements the state rather than the law, it is undeniable that the state is implemented only by implementing the law. Through the implementation of law, the bureaucracy implements the state's program of capitalist accumulation over conferment of beneficiary rights. The implementation of FRA, 2006 in the context of the FA, 1980 directives is a case in point. The post-FA, 1980 India witnesses a phenomenon that while the conferment of rights to the forest dwellers is on the agenda, the escalation of growth is high on the same.

This intention of the postcolonial government has been heightened during the last three decades as 'since 1991, India has witnessed a strategic shift both in the field of Conversion and Development and in pursuance of a path of sustainable development', as the Minister of Environment and Forests, GOI, informed (2004). The Minister has also said that, 'the remarkable feature' of the FA, 1980 'is that it is regulatory and not prohibitory', and rules and guidelines of the said act 'have been framed for diversion of forestland for non-forestry purposes' (Ibid). What the Minister wants to mean by non-forestry purposes is clear when he further mentions in the same document that the regulatory mechanism 'permits only unavoidable use of forestland for various developmental purposes' through which international development donors and corporations could fulfil their interests. It is attention-grabbing when a Minister declares that the forest conservation act, 1980, since its inception, 'has facilitated developmental activities like construction of power projects, irrigation projects, roads, railways ...mining and, etc on forestlands' (Ibid). However, the Minister appends that the act has also 'checked the indiscriminate diversion of pristine forest areas'. While during the first three decades after independence, as the government data reveal,

‘forestlands have been diverted at the rate of 1.50 lakh hectare per annum by the various State Governments/UT administrations’, since 1980 (till 2004), ‘about 9.21 lakh/hectare forest land have been diverted’.

Interestingly, the government does not complain in its conservation narrative that forestlands have been diverted/converted/destroyed by traditional forest dwellers. Instead, the FRA, 2006 identifies that, ‘the forest rights on ancestral lands and their habitat were not adequately recognized’ during the colonial regime as well as in independent India resulting in historical injustices to the forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dependent Communities (OTFDC) ‘who are integral to the very survival and sustainability of the forest ecosystem’. The Scheduled Tribes and the OTFDCs who have been conferred this right are responsible ‘for sustainable use, conservation of biodiversity and maintenance of ecological balance’ while been surviving for generations by basing their lives and livelihoods entirely on what the forest produces.

If this is true, why are the OTFDCs declared illegal encroachers on the forestlands for lack of evidences? The simple answer is that the notion of economic efficiency is prioritized over ecological efficiencies in government policies. Because of this prioritization of economic efficiency, the government, instead of regulating the diversion of forestlands and regenerating the forest cover, intends by dint of this enactment to regulate the Scheduled Tribes and OTFDCs’ lives and livelihoods. But as Scheidel and Work (2018) argue in the context of implementations of climate change mitigation policies in Cambodia, does ‘the explicit environmental ends of the forestry concession enable a ‘green grab’’ that exceeds the scale of land grabs caused by conventional economic land concessions? The recent Supreme Court judgment and the non-recognition of traditional forest-dwellers’ rights in Sundarbans appear to corroborate their argument. Like in Cambodia, in India too customary land users are dispossessed from land and forest resources, and to an extent ‘vast tracks of diverse forest-landscapes are being cleared and converted to acacia monocultures’ in the name of combating climate change. (Ibid:13) Both the forest conservation act and forest right act require ‘a serious rethink’ (EPW 2019) for (re)framing a genuine climate as well as social justice legislation.

## **Conclusion**

Can a government frame genuine climate positive social justice legislation? In other words, is it possible to frame such legislation that would protect the climate as well as ensure equal livelihood opportunities for all? We have seen that the marginal people in the SDB could not utilize effectively the mangrove forests (the ecotone) to strengthen their livelihoods. While they were able to initially earn a minimum income needed for subsistence, they became soon vulnerable to propertied class and needed to migrate to find a livelihood option. The hyper-development initiative undertaken by the government has benefited the propertied class often at expense of both the marginal class and biodiversity. The initiative is a pro-growth argument, which means, as Robra and Heikkurinen (2019) define, and pro-growth scholars believe, 'increased economic activity will lead to higher income levels'. However, several researches including mine (2018) reveal that the increased economic growth/activity would not necessarily lead to increased employment opportunities. The problem with economic growth is not only 'its close correlation with environmental damage, as Robra and Heikkurinen (Ibid) argue. The economic growth never ensures, I argue, higher income levels for all. This is to say, there is hardly any role of growth or increased economic activity in sustainable development. What it needs is indeed de-growth, a movement aiming to reduce the size of the economy for improving overall wellbeing. Based on an ecological notion about the limit to which humans can 'use and transform in absolute terms' the natural resources (through measuring the biophysical metabolism of an economy), a sustainable policy/legislation could be framed. Implementation of this kind of sustainable policy could ensure both climate justice and social justice.

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